

AperTO - Archivio Istituzionale Open Access dell'Università di Torino

New York: A Woman's Dream

This is the author's manuscript

Original Citation:

Availability:

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/2318/92349> since

Publisher:

CIRSDE- Università degli Studi di Torino

Terms of use:

Open Access

Anyone can freely access the full text of works made available as "Open Access". Works made available under a Creative Commons license can be used according to the terms and conditions of said license. Use of all other works requires consent of the right holder (author or publisher) if not exempted from copyright protection by the applicable law.

(Article begins on next page)

New York: A Woman's Dream

Carmen Concilio
Università degli Studi di Torino
carmen.concilio@unito.it

New York as privileged space for a woman's dream will be explored here first by considering two works by South Asian women writers: that is, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*. Then, two voices of Arab women, those of Zena el Khalil and Suheir Hammad, will be taken into consideration for their exemplary act of negotiation with the reality of post September 11 New York.

I would like to suggest that Kiran Desai's successful novel *The Inheritance of Loss*, winner of the Man Booker Prize in 2006, may be read as a kind of counter-discourse, opposed to, for instance, Jhumpa Lahiri's similarly successful novel *The Namesake*, published in 2003.

Lahiri's *The Namesake* turns around the possibility of successful integration for the young Bengali second generation in New York. In contrast, Kiran Desai writes back to this middle class confident perspective, which has been further echoed in the film with the same title by the Indian-New Yorker film director and producer Mira Nair (C. Concilio, 2010: 87-120).

In both novels, the two young Indian women writers employ a male subject as either alter-ego or as representative of the modern immigrant to New York. Thus, in terms of gender discourse these two novels seem to polarize the issue, or the dream of integration around male characters. Jhumpa Lahiri, in particular, projects her own autobiography onto the character of Gogol, a young boy, son of Bengali parents who live in Boston. Like Jhumpa Lahiri herself, Gogol attends an Art College and specializes in Design and Art History. Besides, like the writer herself, Gogol successfully moves from Boston to New York, where he lives on his own and works for an Architectural firm. In spite of the fact that Gogol has lost a first fiancé because of cultural incomprehension, and has been divorced by his Bengali wife and, therefore, is in search of his identity and place within society, his career seems to grant him full citizenship and success.

On her part, Kiran Desai chooses the character of Biju, the son of a Bengali low caste cook, to represent the contemporary illegal immigrant in New York, where the space of the kitchen – usually portrayed in literature as female – is the privileged site for the encounter of underground clandestine young black boys.

The Kitchen as a male space is an interesting *topos* of the globalized and postcolonial condition of dispossessed migrants. The basement itself – that architectural feature typical of Anglo-Saxon countries – where the kitchen is located, also becomes a non-place, that is, it literally becomes a place where the erasure of subjectivity is at work:

Biju at the Baby Bistro.
 Above, the restaurant was French, but below in the kitchen it was Mexican and Indian. And, when a Paki was hired, it was Mexican, Indian, Pakistani.
 Biju at Le Colonial for the authentic colonial experience.
 On top, rich colonial, and down below, poor native.
 Colombian, Tunisian, Ecuadorian, Gambian.
 On the Stars and Stripes Diner. All American flag on top, all Guatemalan flag below.
 Plus one Indian flag when Biju arrived.
 [...]
 There was a whole world in the basement kitchens of New York, but Biju was ill-equipped for it [...] (K. Desai, 2006: 21-2).

Thus, Biju is the exact opposite of Gogol. Never integrated, always condemned to hide away in dark and inhospitable basements,¹⁶ invisibly and precariously surviving in New York, Biju will remain an outcast, soon returning to India with empty hands. It is therefore clear that to Kiran Desai's protagonist New York represents a broken dream, a city where the social status/class remains an indelible and determining stigma, even through the migration from one country to another, where a low caste occupies the interstices of the city as well as its invisible working places:

¹⁶ See also M. Ali (2009): *In the Kitchen*. Doubleday, New York. «This is, in some ways, a post-imperial hotel. It's a low-paid hub for refugees and adventurers from India, Somalia, Mongolia, the Philippines, Eastern Europe. These men and women are invisible to the affluent guests staying in the establishment, and largely invisible to the rest of London, too» Sukhdev, S. (2009): «Monica Ali», in *The Telegraph* (9 April).
 URL: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/5250974/Monica-Ali.html>

When he returned home to the basement of a building at the bottom of Harlem, he fell straight into it. The building belonged to an invisible management company that [...] owned tenements all over the neighbourhood, the superintendent supplementing his income by illegally renting out basement quarters by the week, by the month, and even by the day, to fellow illegals. [...] Biju joined a shifting population of men camping out near the fuse box, behind the boiler, in the cubby holes, and in odd-shaped corners that once were pantries maids' rooms, laundry rooms, and storage rooms at the bottom of what had been a single-family home (*ibidem*: 51-52).

New York represents a broken dream to poor South Asian immigrants in 2006, I would say, also as the aftermath of September 11, 2001. The same crucial date marks the broken dream in the novel *Beirut, I love You. A Memoir* (2009), by Zena el Khalil, the Lebanese artist/performer/war blogger and eventually writer, who left New York after the attack on the Twin Towers. Her choice or, better, her disillusion, was exactly the result of a new need, imposed on her, the need to re-negotiate her presence as an Arab woman in the city of New York:

New York was not the same. After the two buildings fell, I was seen only as an Arab. At school they came up to me asking if I could explain why it all happened. On the streets, people walked far away from me in fear that I may jinx them with my black-and-white-checkered *kuffiyeh*. It seemed that the more people hated Arabs, the more I wanted to be one. The more questions people asked me, the more stories I told them (Z. El Khalil, 2009: 28).

The fact that people, Americans, started questioning Arab women inevitably led to their questioning their role and their presence, over there, in New York. Actually, the voice of the Lebanese artist Zena el Khalil echoes other voices. In particular, her words remind us of a powerful poem/prayer/psalm, «Thoughts» (2001), by the Palestinian-New Yorker writer Suheir Hammad, that reads:

one more person ask me if I knew the hijackers.
one more motherfucker ask me what navy my brother is in.
one more person assume no arabs or muslims were killed.
one more person assume they know me, or that I represent
a people. or that a people represent an evil. or that evil is as
simple as a flag and words on a page. (S. Hammad, 2001: 11).

Similarly, Zena el Khalil insists:

I had been locked up at home for the past week because I was too afraid to be on the streets. [...] we were eight Arabs living in my apartment for five days because we were

afraid of being mobbed. We were afraid of being alone. [...] it was too difficult to speak, and he was asking questions that I was not sure how to answer. Everyone it seemed was asking me questions. Questions because «I was one of them». Because I was Arab. [...] He couldn't understand how I could be painting. And really, neither could I. But it seemed my only escape. I was an Arab in New York City. I wanted to hide, but people were asking me too many questions (Z. El Khalil, 2009: 31).

Besides, almost with one voice, and because of their shared Middle Eastern common consciousness of the Palestinian diaspora the two women writers produce a discourse that connects what happened in New York to other crises across the World. For instance, Zena el Khalil writes:

I wanted to tell my classmates about South Lebanon, Palestine, about Sri Lanka, Burma, about South America, and Africa. I wanted to ask them if they remembered Bosnia and Iraq. I wanted to ask them if they remembered their very own Native Americans. I wanted to tell them that people die every day and that what happened in New York City on September 11, 2001 was no different (*ibidem*: 32).

Similarly, Suheir Hammad wrote in her uncapitalized script:

on my block a woman was crying in a car parked and
strained in hurt. I offered comfort, extended a hand she did
not see before she said, «we're gonna burn them so bad, I
swear, so bad» my hand went to my head and my head
went to the numbers within it of the dead Iraqi children, the
dead in nicaragua. the dead in rwanda who had to vie with
fake sport wrestling for america's attention.

Yet when people sent emails saying, this was bound to
happen, lets not forget u.s. transgressions, for half a second I
felt resentful. hold up with that, cause I live here, these are
my friends and fam, and it could have been me in those buildings, and we're not bad
people, do not support america's bullying. can I just have a half second to feel bad? (S.
Hammad, 2001: 10-11).¹⁷

¹⁷ «To the victims of the attack and their relatives one can offer our deep sympathy as one does to people who the US government has victimised. But to accept that somehow an American life is worth more than that of a Rwandan, a Yugoslav, a Vietnamese, a Korean, a Japanese, a Palestinian... that is unacceptable» (T. Ali, 2001: 83).

As shown in the two stanzas, Hammad is the one who lives in New York, and whose position, torn between contradictory alliances, is more critical and requires further negotiations:

first, please god, let it be a mistake, the pilot's heart failed,
the plane's engine died.
then, please god, let it be a nightmare, wake me now.
please god, after the second plane, please, don't let
it be anyone
who looks like my brothers (*ibidem*:9).

In contrast, Zena el Khalil chooses to leave New York and to move back to Beirut, her home-town, as a choice of personal artistic growth.

We all come to this city as strangers, but at some point we become family, and when that transition happens it is a beautiful rebirth. To feel like you are part of the greatest city on Earth

.But after the buildings fell, I packed up my bags, and threw away my art. I said goodbye to Brooklyn, Queens and Manhattan, and I flew back to Beirut. I left New York. I left Iyad.

I came to Beirut. It was suicide and bliss (Z. El Khalil, 2009: 44).

Nevertheless, the choice of the artist to go back home to Beirut is quite striking, for it shows once again how New York has become a broken dream, how it has stopped to represent the land of opportunities and has turned into a city that can be easily left behind. Both Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai live their integrated working lives in New York, while some of their characters leave the city to go back to India. Zena el Khalil, in contrast, has no second thoughts, to her Beirut represents her own Mediterranean New York.

Following Virginia Woolf's predicaments, Zena el Khalil in Beirut looks for a room of her own, in terms of a space where to give voice to her talent as a figurative artist and as a writer. Yet, like Virginia Woolf's character, Orlando, the fictional and autobiographical protagonist Zena goes back to Beirut as a woman artist, after having been rejected by New York some decades before, in her previous incarnation as an Arab boy, Hussein, who died on the *Titanic* in 1912:

Hussein's great love was New York City. [...] New York always represents a certain type of freedom. New York is always about people being people: drinking coffee, walking their dogs, painting, reading, hanging out, studying, working, eating, meeting, growing, running in the park, laughing, loving, living. What I've grown to learn – the hard way – is that New York can also be a monster. [...]

New York City is also an illusion.

New York does not welcome everyone. It is selective about who it takes in. It will claim your soul in return for a high rent you cannot afford. New York will put you into a category. It will make you fat, short, black or white.

It will make you Arab (*ibidem*: 13).

Hussein had left Lebanon, Beirut, the Biblical Paradise of his childhood, and was travelling with a third class ticket on the *Titanic*, where apparently «No Arabs» and «no dogs» were allowed. This injunction translates the similar universal ban on Jews in the '40s, and, later, on Italian immigrants to the States in the '50s. Hussein's dream to reach New York had failed when he was drowned in the dark waters of the Atlantic:

As Hussein, I lay at the bottom of the sea for almost five-and-a-half years. I wandered in the darkness all by myself, searching for the glitz and glam they called New York. I could not find it. [...] This New World would not have me, alive or dead. [...] A hazy memory came back to me: «No Arabs, no dogs» (*ibidem*: 19).

Thus, New York becomes a city that rejects immigrants, particularly if they are Arabs or poor South Asians, like Biju in Desai's novel. This statement resonates as more credible and more sinister as an aftermath of September 11, 2001: «Because, suddenly after September 11, 2001, all Arabs were expected to explain themselves. What if we didn't know? What if that had nothing to do with us?» (*ibidem*: 38). In the meanwhile, this disillusion, this broken dream also reverses literary stereotypes of New York as a hospitable melting pot, as cosmopolitan harbour for refugees and ethnic minorities.

Apart from this fictional double failure to settle in New York through her reincarnation – a concept that is deeply rooted in the Druse religious tradition of Zena el Khalil – paradoxically, Zena leaves New York right at the moment when it has become really home. This happens when Iyad, a young Lebanese man she has met in a bookstore, introduces her to New York ethnic night life and ethnic stores:

I ran all the way home. Home. I was calling it home now. It felt good (Z. El Khalil, 2009: 36).

Chinatown, Little Italy. It all made sense now. I had only thought of them as tourist traps before, but now I knew how real and necessary they were (*ibidem*: 42).

Kiran Desai, Suheir Hammad and Zena El Khalil's voices are particularly interesting for they stand not only as individual voices of world women writers who claim different agendas. More precisely, Kiran Desai translates her social engagement in the portrait of an exemplary displaced, invisible black male non-citizen of our globalized contemporary scenario. Zena el Khalil, while playing the same tune of rejected third class Middle Eastern subjects, adds her personal gendered agenda of a woman who, in turn, rejects New York, and looks for her identity as an artist in Beirut, translating herself geopolitically into a city that represents a cosmopolitan, plurilingual and religiously and culturally varied reality in the Mediterranean. Suheir Hammad's words stress her «work toward social justice, in support of civil liberties, in opposition to hateful foreign policies». And she adds: «I have never felt less american and more new yorker – particularly brooklyn than these past days» (S. Hammad, 2001: 12).

Almost as a choir, they not only act/write as women, activists, pacifists, as does Hammad, when she claims: «but I know for sure who will pay. // in the world, it will be women, mostly coloured and poor. women will have to bury children, and support themselves / through grief. 'either you are with us, or with the terrorists' / – meaning keep your people under control and your resistance censored» (*idem*). This quotation resonates as powerfully evocative, if read in the light of the Canadian film *Incendies* by Denis Villeneuve and inspired by a play written by the Lebanese actor and director Wajdi Mouawad, whose main character, a woman activist, pays a high price in war times.

And yet, women also take responsibility on behalf of other male subjects. As if to say that a woman's duty is to appear in front of History's trial not only as an individual subject *per se*, but also on behalf of her relations, as self-cum-others: husbands, sons, brothers, friends. Zena el Khalil, for instance, refers to her friend Iyad, when she says:

After the buildings fell, Iyad disappeared. He slept all day and worked all night. Picking up rubble. Inhaling toxic fumes. Looking for survivors. Looking for his

people that he loved so much. Looking for New Yorkers as if they were his family. I guess to him, they were. All eleven million of them. His heart took over. His mind switched off. He could no longer take the questions of how, how, how, something like this could happen? His two worlds collided. After hiding away for so many years, it all caught up with him. Violence, it seemed, was becoming universal. As he dug away with his bare hands he questioned his identity. Arab, Arab-Amreekan, Amreekan, Earthling? (Z. El Khalil, 2009: 38).

Once again, Suheir Hammad wrote:

'my brother's in the navy', i said. 'and we are arabs'. 'wow, you got double trouble'.
word.
my baby brother is a man now, and on alert, and praying five
times a day that the orders he will take in a few days time
are righteous and will not weigh his soul down from the
afterlife he deserves. both my brothers – my heart stops
when I try to pray – not a beat to disturb my fear. one a
rock god, the other sergeant, and both palestinian, practising
muslim, gentle men. both born in brooklyn and their faces
are of the archetypal arab men. all eyelashes and nose
beautiful colour and stubborn hair.
what their life will be like now? (S. Hammad, 2001: 11-13).

In conclusion, speaking from their own (or their characters') common and shared circumscribed urban perspective, from Brooklyn, Queens, Harlem, these writers provide a new and surprising view of New York as a city that still marginalizes, still others and sometimes even rejects immigrants; as a broken dream that needs to be reconstructed and pieced together, not only in terms of material infrastructures but also in terms of social fabric. A city that once again needs to build cultural bridges rather than concrete buildings. And it must be said that Suheir Hammad is one among 36 intellectuals – such as Galeano, Sontag, Chomsky, Tarik Ali, Vandana Shiva, Edward Said... – who participated in the writing of a kind of literary Manifesto called *Voices of Sanity* dedicated exactly to that reconstruction of the social fabric, to that building of cultural bridges and to a revision of the current anti-islamism.

Bibliography

- Ali, M. (2009): *In the Kitchen*. Doubleday, New York.
- Ali, T. (2001): «Will Pakistan Jump to US Demands?», in Bashin, K.; Smitu, K.; Bindia, T. (eds), *Voices of Sanity Reaching Out For Peace*. Lokayan, Delhi, 81-83.
- Bashin, K.; Smitu, K.; Bindia, T. (eds) (2001): *Voices of Sanity Reaching Out For Peace*. Lokayan, Delhi.
- Concilio, C. (2010): «From West Bengal to New York: The Global Novels of Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai», in Carosso, A. (ed), *Urban Cultures off/in the United States. Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Peter Lang, Bern, 87-120.
- Desai, K. (2006): *Inheritance of Loss*. Hamish Hamilton, New York.
- El Khalil, Z. (2009): *Beirut, I Love You: A Memoir*. Saqi, London.
- Ghosh, A. (2005): «September 11», in *Incendiary Circumstances. A Chronicle of the Turmoil of Our Times*. Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 32-35.
- Kumar, A. (2002): *Bombay, London, New York*. Routledge, New York.
- Hammad, S. (2001): «Thoughts», in Bashin, K.; Smitu, K.; Bindia, T. (eds), op.cit.
- Lahiri, J. (2003): *The Namesake*. Harper Collins, New Delhi.
- Sahagal, G.; Yuval Davis, N. (1992): *Refusing Holy Orders. Women and Fundamentalism in Britain*. Virago, London.
- Sukhdev, S. (2009): «Monica Ali», *The Telegraph*, 9 April.